

There are any number of dance manuals that offer descriptions of nineteenth-century ballrooms, but it makes sense here to turn again to Elias Howe—onetime Lowell millworker—and his co-authors for information.

“Ball-rooms, like tastes, vary so much, that it is impossible to describe the particular form that prevails. But that which gives the greatest satisfaction has a form nearly square, one side being only a little longer than the other.”

“The head or top of the ball-room is that end of the room where would be the head of the table, were the room converted into a dining-room. Where there is an orchestra at one end, the orchestra end is the head, and will be found in general farthest from the principal *entrée*, or staircase. It is always of importance to know and remember the head of the ball-room, as ladies and couples at the head always take the lead in the dance.”

“Good flooring is indispensable for a ball-room; but when the floor is rough, the evil may be remedied by covering it with holland, tightly stretched—a practice which is now much in vogue. This adds greatly to the comfort, and improves the appearance of the floor. The holland may even be stretched over the carpet. The room ought to be well lighted and well ventilated. Those who give private parties should carefully attend to these two particulars.” [*Holland is a tightly woven cotton or linen fabric, often heavily finished.* —Author]

“Good music should also be provided; for bad music will spoil the best dancing, and destroy both the beauty and the pleasure of the entertainment.”¹ —Howe’s *American Dancing Master*, 1862.

The preceding instructions seem to be primarily for well-to-do homeowners throwing private balls. In 1868, the owners of French’s hall were promoting a different approach, as shown in the *Lowell Daily Courier* article below.

“**A New Idea.** Quite a new plan of having large parties without trouble to housekeepers and without injury to furniture is coming into vogue here. It is to invite one’s guests to French’s hall, where there is ample room for dancing and other amusements, and where Messrs. Nichols and Hutchins are prepared to supply refreshments in elegant style. Where one’s house is not large enough—as few houses are—to accommodate several hundred guests, or when for any reason it is desirable not to use one’s house, as on account of sickness, &c., we think this plan is an admirable one, and it is likely to be extensively adopted. Several such parties have already been held, and those who have given them are delighted to be able to get up the next morning and find their domestic arrangements undisturbed.”²

The Ball Room: Its decorum, dimensions, and delights

Opposite: This photograph from a stereoscope card depicts a turn-of-the-century New England ballroom.

Right: Ballroom image from a 1907 postcard.

